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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses miscommunication in speech acts, speech act research, and applications in the classroom. A new model of speech acts proposed by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell is discussed. The distinguishing feature of this model is that the pivotal center is discourse competence. Discourse competence interacts with the three subfields of sociolinguistic competence, linguistic competence, and actional competence. The three facts influencing success in interpersonal communication are covered. These are mutual shared knowledge, specific situational factors and personal perceptions. An overview is taken to see what research can accomplish for the teacher. A cycle of data collection to be followed by all speech researchers include ethnographic data collection, role playing, the Discourse Completion Test, the Acceptability Test and self reporting. The student should become aware of social factors, pragmatic factors and specific features of speech-act interaction. Teachers can adjust their expectations regarding interlanguage features of speech-act behavior. (Contains 2 references.) (CK)

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From interpersonal to classroom discourse: Developing research methods

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This is the text of a talk presented at the 1994 Nessa Wolfson Memorial Colloquium at the University of Pennsylvania.

Thank you for inviting me to come here today. I am both honored and grateful to be able to speak at the Nessa Wolfson Colloquium. Nessa was a very dear friend of mine, and in many ways she was my mentor. I feel very fortunate to have known her, worked with her, and learned from her. As a researcher, she knew how to add the human touch to her work, and this is something I greatly appreciated in her studies. I think we can learn a lot from her example.

Now to begin with today, I want to look at these three subjects: miscommunication in speech acts, speech act research, and applications in the classroom. To start, speech acts must be viewed within the larger framework of communicative competence. The model we are familiar with is the one put forth by Canale and Swain (1980), but today I want to refer to a new one proposed by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell, which will be published this year (see Figure). The distinguishing feature of this model is that the pivotal center is discourse competence, and everything else revolves around this. Discourse competence interacts with the three subfields of sociolinguistic competence, linguistic competence, and actional competence. In their work on this subject, Celce-Murcia *et al* concentrate on actional competence in speech act behavior in order to emphasize how one translates one's ideas into actions in the community. It is also crucial to note that in the background of the model, affecting all of these areas, is what Canale and Swain call strategic competence, but in this model, it is really the individual ability that compensates for what might be insufficient in any of the other areas. In other words, these are strategies to compensate for what the learner does not know.

As language teachers, we are aware of the need to do research in this area. But when we talk of "interlanguage," remember that it is not present only in L2 learning; it is

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any distinction between languages. In fact, bilinguals might have this distinction in both languages, and the first language learner also has it. The following are some research questions relating to interlanguage features:

1. To what extent has the learner acquired the linguistic repertoire needed to realize the particular speech act?

2. To what extent is the learner's speech-act behavior similar to or different from a native speaker's behavior under the same circumstances? Does this difference affect the learner's ability to act properly?

3. What compensation strategies does the learner use when his or her language is inadequate?

4. What is the learner's selection route and decision-making process with respect to strategy preference, content limitation, illocutionary intent, etc.

Looking at the model presented in the figure and also the research questions presented above, we can see that the model and the research framework come together. All of this can be summed up as asking: what is the learner's awareness of making choices? Some learners are not aware that there are problems and decisions to be made. We would like to know the learner's decision-making process because as teachers and researchers, we can design better ways to make the learner responsible for part of the learning. How can we share this burden with our students? Today we feel that language learning success depends heavily on the learner's own evaluation of this process.

Figure: Components of Communicative Competence (adapted from Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell, pre-publication copy)

Speech Acts and the Second Language Learner: What Can Go Wrong?

First, let's determine what factors influence success in interpersonal communication. We have three major areas to consider here: mutual shared knowledge, specific situational factors, and personal perceptions. Shared knowledge can be anything, including content (such as this talk on sociolinguistics), experience, social conventions, cultural expectations, and value systems; specific situational factors are the participants and the circumstances; and personal perceptions are the individual differences: the intentions, the expectations, and the interpretation of the events.

This last category is especially interesting because we know that with these individual differences, communication can go wrong even within the same culture. One illustration of this miscommunication is illustrated in the following dialogue in which two native speakers of English in a department of an American university have a mismatch of individual intentions and even different shared knowledge:

Woman: Excuse me, where can I make some xerox copies?

Clerk: For?

Woman: (silence)

Clerk: Are you an instructor?

Woman: No, a student.

Clerk: We can only make xerox copies for instructors.

Woman: Well, I. . .OK. But where can I find a xerox machine (original intention)?

Clerk: Oh, I see. Up the stairs, past the bookstore.

In this speech act, the clerk clearly mistakes an information question for a request for xeroxing. Since the two participants are both native speakers, they can quickly make corrections, and there is no big tragedy. They know both the language and the culture. We get this sort of cultural information very early on in our first language, as studies of nursery children have shown (Grimshaw, 1990).

As teachers and researchers, we know that things can go wrong at any point in the speech act when we are dealing with nonnative speakers, and the situation is much more complicated when you don't know the culture. There may be an inappropriate formula realization on the part of the speaker, or an inappropriate reaction to what a speaker has

said. Sometimes we see situations in which the intermediate student, because of his higher proficiency level, can actually get into more trouble than the beginner student who must limit his participation to single words. I am reminded of a Chinese student who was studying English at the intermediate level in the United States. He had accidentally taken another student's umbrella, and when confronted with this fact, he issued a profuse apology and explanation when a simple "sorry" was entirely sufficient. A beginner student would have responded with the appropriate apology simply because that would be all he was capable of saying.

Intralinguistic and Intercultural Features: What Do We Want From Research?

Now that we have seen where miscommunication can occur, let's see what research can accomplish for the teacher. We will assume that communicative competence leads to successful communication, and we can define successful communication as the learners ability to react in a culturally acceptable way in a given context. As teachers, we want to know how to bring learners to this level, so we should address the following questions in our research: First, what are the universal features common to everyone? Second, what are the language-specific features?

In addressing these issues we need to look at both the pragmatic as well as the linguistic considerations of any particular speech act. Pragmatic considerations include the cultural norms, speaker-hearer relations, and the context of the act. We all might have ways of apologizing, for example, but what are the different ways in which we apologize? Apologies will vary in intensity, so that in some contexts, apologies are unnecessary, while in others they are required. If I step on someone's toe on a crowded bus, I might offer only a minimal apology, but if I miss an appointment, I definitely owe an apology to my acquaintance. Think of how often international students get into difficulty because they don't know how to measure the degree of offense of so many things that they do. Linguistic considerations include factors such as the available repertoire of the student, direct and indirect speech, and linguistic conventions. As an example of direct and indirect form in the speech act, we can imagine the need to make a request. I can say, "It's rather hot in here," or I can say "Open the window." The student needs to be aware of these differences in form because their use becomes conventionalized and make up the rules of appropriateness. As teachers, we need to find these rules through research before we can teach them to our students.

Research can help us in two areas. First, we need to know more about social factors, such as rules regarding social power, social distance, age, and sex. Keep in mind, however, that other factors might play a part in some cultures. Second, we need to know more about pragmatic factors, such as severity violations in making an apology. We can ask -- who apologizes? In what situations? Who never needs to apologize? In some cultures, for example, the military or the government never needs to apologize. We need to know how speech act behavior relates to these considerations.

The complexity of speech act realization patterns and of strategy selection as paired up with social and pragmatic features requires careful development of research instruments and data collection procedures. Researchers need to combine ethnographic and elicited data collection techniques in order to secure both reliability and efficiency in the process. I suggest a cycle of data collection that should ideally be followed by all researchers in this field:

1. Ethnographic data collection should enable us to form a general hypothesis about the speech act set, and about cultural preferences. The research disadvantage, however, is the fact that we can never be sure to cover the full range of social and pragmatic factors that we need in spite of the fact that we can collect large amounts of data. The important advantage is the authenticity of the data.

2. Role play activities provide an initial test of our hypothesis and enable us to focus on specific circumstantial and social features. Here we should go outside of the university setting and into other communities.

3. The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) has the very important advantage that it can be fully manipulated by the researcher to focus on selected variables. It can be administered to a large group of respondents, and it can be adjusted for gender, age, or any other variable. The instrument has another important value in that it can be used for cross-cultural or other cross-group comparisons. This is an excellent basis for establishing the basic strategies of the speech act set.

4. The Acceptability Test enables us to establish the range of acceptable versus non-acceptable forms of speech from the entire range of behavior collected from the DCT.

5. Self reporting on production on one of the elicitation tests has shown to be problematic, but this method can be extremely insightful when added to the use of a DCT. In this case, the participants would narrate why they made the choices they did on the DCT. To complete the cycle, we have the option of testing our results against new ethnographic data.

Conclusion: What Can We Teach in the Classroom?

There are some situations where the student misses all of the previously mentioned social and cultural factors. One primary danger comes from textbooks which present examples of dialogues for the learner to memorize. After accomplishing this task, the learner believes that this is how he should behave in the real world. It is very misleading to give a student a faulty instrument that he believes will always work.

What can both the learner and the teacher do to help their predicament? The student should become aware of social factors, pragmatic factors, and specific features of speech-act interaction. Every learner should be a little bit of a sociolinguist. From this point, they can develop their own compensation strategies.

Our stress should be on promoting awareness. We need to demonstrate that there is no bad intention involved in miscommunication. Teachers can put emphasis on the integration of social and pragmatic considerations in language teaching, but they should avoid making these examples into firm norms. Teachers can also adjust their expectations to interlanguage features of speech-act behavior. We know that we can teach the third-person singular "s" for four years, but the learner still might not acquire this form. Likewise, we need to realize that there are things our students will not do because they remain culture-bound to their native culture. When teaching new forms, instructors can also provide "safety rules" in order to give their students a few different ways out of a difficult situation. Examples of these teaching techniques might include the use of role-plays developed from student observations of their community outside of the university.

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